

Grand Widening: Concerns focus on pedestrians Residents review proposals

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Sun City resident B.J. Schuetz, right, and Youngtown Councilwoman Margaret Chittenden, center, question Bob Hansman, ADOT representative, Dec. 2 during a public open house about the Grand Avenue widening plans in the area of 111th Avenue.

Work could begin less than a year away on the Grand Avenue widening project and Arizona Department of Transportation officials continue to gather public input to shape the project.

While the general purpose of the effort is clear — add a third traffic lane in each direction — ADOT officials want to hear from people about specific details of their area project. The widening is planned from 83rd Avenue to Loop 303 and will be done in four phases, with the majority of the actual roadway widening coming in the first phase of construction, according to Brock Barnhart, ADOT spokesman. Work is expected to start in the fall of 2009 with project completion projected 18 months later, he added.

“We are confident we will move forward with this project despite the downturn in the economy,” Mr. Barnhart said.

Northwest Valley residents got another chance to express their ideas and concerns during open house presentations Dec. 2 in Sun City and El Mirage.

Much of the concern in the Sun City area revolves around pedestrian safety. Youngtown Councilwoman Margaret Chittenden urged ADOT officials to revisit their plans for crosswalks painted on the roadways at major intersections. She suggested they further study pedestrian patterns. ADOT maps at the open house showed a crosswalk across Grand Avenue on the east side at 111th Avenue. However, Ms. Chittenden argued it should be on the west side of the intersection.

“People use that to go to Jack In the Box,” she said. “People aren’t going to walk across Grand to get to the car wash.”

Other residents are worried they will not have enough time to cross Grand Avenue in crosswalks because of the timing of walk signals and traffic lights. Mr. Barnhart said pedestrian signals in the Sun City corridor will be timed slower than at other intersections in the Valley specifically to address the older population. He also said countdown timers on the pedestrian signals will tell walkers how long they have before the signal changes.

Medians will also include Americans with Disabilities Act compliant waiting areas for pedestrian and

wheelchair traffic not able to get across all six lanes at once, according to Bob Hansman, ADOT representative.

Other residents expressed concerns about vehicle traffic issues. Some were concerned about train and emergency vehicle access at intersections and how that would affect traffic. Dennis Ecker, ADOT representative, said all signals will include preemption devices to halt traffic when trains or emergency vehicles use the intersections. In response to one resident's question, he also said right turns on a red light from the far right westbound lane of Grand Avenue will be allowed unless preempted by a passing train.

Funding for the project comes from the Regional Transportation Project with a half-cent sales tax increase approved by voters in 2004. Mr. Barnhart said there are also federal highway dollars available.

The roadway is targeted for widening because it is a primary urban arterial and a link to Wickenburg and destinations beyond, including Las Vegas, Mr. Barnhart said. ADOT officials project 25,000 vehicles daily will use Grand Avenue by 2010 and that is expected to nearly double — to 46,100 — by 2025, he added.

Much of the widening will occur in the existing medians to preserve the rights-of-way on either side of the roadway, according to Mr. Hansman. He said the finished project will include raised medians with extra turn pockets.

"We will also be synchronizing the (traffic) lights to try and diminish stoppage," he said. "We are still working on just how this will be done."

ADOT will install rubberized asphalt to help reduce tire noise, Mr. Hansman said. In addition, a section of Grand Avenue between 99th and 111th avenues will get pavement reconstruction, including rubberized asphalt.

"We found the pavement in that area was in such shape that we could not just repair it, it had to be replaced," he said.

ADOT crews will install sound walls on the south side of Grand Avenue between 105th Avenue and Coggins Drive and between 108th and 111th avenues to further reduce noise for condominium owners adjacent to Grand Avenue in those locations. ADOT officials, following some confusion over the ownership of common walls during a presentation to Sun City Homeowners Association in April, talked with condo association officials to determine owners preferences.

"They had three choices — leave it as is, replace their walls with ours or have our wall built parallel to theirs," Mr. Barnhart said. "Their preference was to have ours built parallel to theirs."

Most of the construction work will be conducted at night to minimize traffic interruption, according to Mr. Barnhart. However, two lanes of travel in both directions will be maintained at all times, he added.

Mr. Barnhart said ADOT officials are also mindful of Sun City's year-long 50th anniversary celebration being planned for 2010, "We will do everything we can to minimize the impact on that celebration," he said.